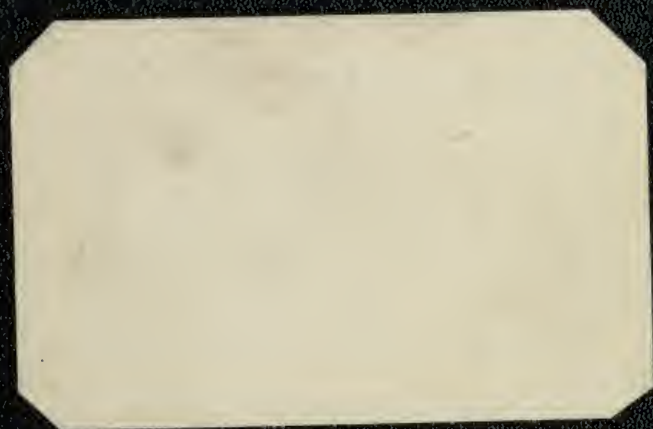


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SPEECH

OF

JOHN P. HALE,

Of New Hampshire,

ON THE

ABOLITION OF SLAVERY

IN THE

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA.

DELIVERED IN THE SENATE OF THE UNITED STATES, MARCH 18, 1862.

The bill for the release of certain persons held to service or labor in the District of Columbia being under consideration, Mr. HALE addressed the Senate as follows:

MR. PRESIDENT: I fear, from the long time that I have been entitled to the floor upon this subject, the expectation may have been indulged by some that I proposed to make some extended remarks on it; but I do not. I propose in a very brief manner to notice one of the objections raised by the honorable Senator from Kentucky [Mr. DAVIS] to this bill; and that is in regard to the consequences that are to ensue upon the enactment of the bill now before the Senate. I may remark that of all the forms skepticism ever assumed, the most insidious, the most dangerous, and the most fatal, is that which suggests that it is unsafe to perform plain and simple duty for fear that disastrous consequences may result therefrom.

This question of emancipation, wherever it has been raised in this country, so far as I know, has rarely ever been argued upon the great and fundamental principles of right; the inquiry is never put, certainly in legislative circles, what is right, what is just, what is due to the individuals that are to be affected by the measure, but what are to be the consequences? Men entirely forget to look at the objects that are to be affected by the bill, in view of the inherent rights of their manhood, in view of the great questions of humanity, of Christianity, and of duty; but what are to be the consequences, what is to be its effect upon the price of sugar, tobacco, cotton, and other necessaries and luxuries of life? The honorable Senator from Kentucky looks upon

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it in that point of view entirely. Let me here read from his statement, for I shall not trust myself to state what a man said, after the censure I had from the Senator from Illinois, without reading from his own remarks. The Senator from Kentucky said, when this bill was last under consideration :

“The negroes that are now liberated and that remain in this city, will become a sore and a burden and a charge upon the white population. They will be criminals; they will become paupers. They will be engaged in crimes and in petty misdemeanors. They will become a charge and a pest upon this society, and the power which undertakes to liberate them ought to relieve the white community in which they reside, and in which they will become a pest, from their presence. This is a poor city at any rate. The total amount of wealth here is very inconsiderable for the number of the white population. The burdens and charges upon them are heavy, onerous, oppressive; and this measure will make those burdens greatly more so.”

I would thank the honorable Senator from Kentucky, if I misrepresent him, to state so now. I do not misrepresent him. The honorable Senator went further, and not only expressed this as his firm and undoubting conviction; but he added in his own emphatic manner, “I know that it is so.” Now, it does not become me to say that I know to the contrary; it does not become me to venture my opinions against the opinions of that Senator who has lived among the population of which he speaks; but it is as much my prerogative as it is the honorable Senator’s to read a little of history, and to know what is its teaching upon this question, and by that test to compare the predictions of the honorable Senator with some other predictions of a different character that have been made elsewhere on other occasions.

With those who assume the ground that is taken by the honorable Senator from Kentucky, the effects of emancipation in the British West Indies and St. Domingo are pointed at continually, as if they furnished unerring proof of the accuracy with which they estimate the consequences that are to follow emancipation. I ask the attention of the Senate for a few moments to some facts in relation to that matter. I know very well that upon the island of Jamaica, so far as that island is concerned, there has been a constant deterioration and diminution of its productive industry in regard to the great staples which formerly constituted its wealth; and that is pointed at triumphantly as proof that it is unsafe, unwise, and inexpedient to adopt any such measure. But, sir, if gentlemen will look at the statistical history of the island of Jamaica, they will find indisputable figures taken from the highest authority, to wit, the colonial reports made to the Imperial Parliament of Great Britain, that the deterioration of Jamaica had commenced long and long before emancipation was even thought of, and that it went down in a constantly decreasing ratio until emancipation, and subsequently. To prove what I say, I will give you a series of statistics, going back as far as the year 1801.

During the seven years ending in 1807, the exports of sugar from Jamaica amounted to an average of 133,000 hogsheads per annum. For the succeeding seven years, from 1807 to 1814, the annual exports of sugar fell off to an average of 118,000 hogsheads. During the next seven years, from 1814 to 1821, the annual average was 110,000 hogs-

heads. From 1821 to 1828, it ran down to 96,000 hogsheads, and from 1828 to 1835, it got down to 90,000 hogsheads; and it has been constantly decreasing ever since. More than one hundred estates had been abandoned on account of being overrun with debt long before the scheme of emancipation had been applied to Jamaica. The evils of this depreciation in the exports, and the abandonment of the estates of the planters, were attributed, in the official reports that were made to the mother government and by writers upon the subject, to the fact that the island was holden and managed by absentee proprietors. The proprietors were rich, lived distant from their estates, and they were managed by their slaves, guided by overseers. The consequence of this system was a constant decrease in the exports, and a diminution of the wealth of the island and an abandonment of its estates long and long before the measure of emancipation had been applied to it. But, sir, since emancipation, and since this diminution of the exports of its former great staple, the island has been divided into small proprietorships, and the proprietors of these estates have got up a system of exports of other things, such as cocoanuts, &c., which now amount to a very considerable sum. I have not taken the trouble to bring the tables with me, but there is a very considerable amount of exports from small proprietors of small articles of which the island exported none at all until after emancipation.

But, sir, Jamaica is almost the only island that shows a comparative decrease of wealth from the effect of emancipation. It is different in the island of Barbadoes. That island has increased in its exports, in its value, in its wealth, more than double since emancipation, and I have before me a table taken from a recent writer, who has travelled in that country and whose figures are compiled from the Parliamentary reports; for I have taken the pains myself to go to the Congress Library and compare them with the official reports, and therefore I know that the tables are correct. They give this satisfying result in regard to the leeward islands, Antigua, Dominica, Nevis, Montserrat, and St. Kitts, from the year 1820 to 1832, taking an average of twelve years immediately preceding emancipation, the total exportations of sugar from these islands averaged 45,420,000 pounds, while in 1858 the exports of sugar from these same islands amounted to 48,145,000 pounds, being an increase of nearly 3,000,000 pounds of sugar in the annual exports from the leeward islands. The imports show a much more favorable result. From 1820 to 1832 the average annual value of imports was £298,000 sterling, while the imports into the same islands in 1858 were £514,835 sterling, showing an excess of annual imports under free labor of £216,835 sterling.

That is the practical result of emancipation as applied to those five West India islands; and if gentlemen who think that the experiment of emancipation will not compare so favorably as that in other islands, will go to the Library of Congress, and look at the official reports made by the governors of those islands, they will see that the result is even more favorable in many of the islands than that which is here exhibited with regard to the five leeward islands. It is a mistake, a very great mistake, and I hope that it will be gratifying to the humane feelings of the honorable Senator from Kentucky to find that he is

altogether mistaken as to the effects that emancipation will produce upon this laboring class of population. I hope that it will do something to expel from his mind that skepticism which makes him shrink from looking at this measure in the light in which an enlightened and philanthropic statesman ought to look at it, and that is in regard to its bearings upon the great question of human rights.

Mr. President, it seems to me that, in the good providence of God, He presents to this nation to-day an opportunity never presented before. If the rebellion which is now rending this republic, and which is strewing our plains with the dead of our young men who have gone out to do battle on the field, has horrors—if it has miseries—if it has everything, or almost everything, to make humanity weep—it is not without some aspects that relieve the dark shade of the picture. If this rebellion—I trust ere long to be crushed out—shall, in the progress of the great injury that it is doing, afford this republic, these United States, the opportunity of trying here, in this little District of less than ten miles square, the experiment which other nations are trying upon a great scale, and if we are enabled to show to the world that it is sometimes safe to do right, and not always inexpedient, then, sir, we shall have achieved something at which humanity will rejoice, and something for which our posterity, to the latest generations, will bless us.

Sir, the Governments of the world the world over are trying this experiment. The Emperor of Russia on his throne and over his vast dominions, is now striking the bands of oppression from his long trodden down millions of serfs. The ameliorating influences of better principles and purer Christianity than have yet prevailed in the monarchies of the Old World are melting those iron despotisms, and carrying into practical effect that great lesson of Christianity, “to loose the bonds of wickedness” and “let the oppressed go free;” and it would be a reproach that ought to mantle the cheek of every citizen of this Republic with burning shame, if, at this day and this hour, when the monarchies of the earth are waking up to the great question of human rights, and making Christianity, instead of being a barren speculation, a practical and efficient principle of their government, this nation, at a time when the providence of God presents this opportunity to it, should, from any skepticism or fear of consequences, fail to meet the question and do justice by the oppressed.

Sir, I do not ask that the Government of the United States should trample upon the Constitution in any one of its provisions. I believe that up to a very late period in our history, it was the conceded doctrine of this Republic, by statesmen North and South, that the constitutional power to legislate upon the subject of slavery in this District existed in Congress. I know that in late years that has been questioned, and even denied. I know that within the last ten or twelve years this nation has been rent upon a new dogma, which denied the constitutional power of Congress to legislate for the Territories; and, while that question was rending the country, while it was tearing political parties in twain, dividing churches, bringing itself home to the hearts and consciences of this people, the Supreme Court of the United States undertook, with their puny efforts, to throw themselves in the way of

the great question by the Dred Scott decision, and to say to the surging waves of humanity that, while washing But the stains of oppression from our history, they should go thus far and no further. The Supreme Court will find out ere long how much that has effected.— Whether it has done more to wipe out the controversies that they wanted to crush out, or to obliterate whatever of respect there was remaining in the public heart for themselves, they will find out before the issue is settled.

But, sir, while by this decision the Territories of the United States were taken theoretically from the management of the Federal Government, I believe, though I never read the Dred Scott decision in reference to that particular view of it, it did not go to the extent of saying that Congress had no constitutional power to legislate in the District of Columbia. They did not say it, I am told. I am glad they did not. I think they would if they had thought of it. [Laughter.] But, sir, that is left to us. Over this little spot of ten miles square, or what there is left of it after the retrocession of the part ceded by Virginia, we have confessedly the right of legislation; and here in our midst, and by our laws, this system of human slavery exists, and we are called upon to-day to abolish it, to repeal the laws upon which it rests, and to the most limited extent to try what will be the effect of emancipation upon the few slaves that are in this District.

Now, sir, I do not question in the slightest degree the very strong convictions which the honorable Senator from Kentucky has upon this question; but I ask him, and I ask every man who hesitates upon it the grounds he has suggested, to take the trouble not to read the frothy speeches made upon the floor of the House of Representatives or the Senate during the last ten or twenty years, but to go to the facts as they are portrayed by the impartial pen of history. I ask them to look at the statistics which exist to-day as to the condition of the colored population in those islands in which emancipation has been tried. They will find that no such disastrous consequences have ensued. Sir, the account that was given of the final inauguration of emancipation in the British West Indies in 1838, ought to stand in all time to be read by every man that wishes to inform himself upon this subject as to the character of this much abused population, and the effects of this much abused measure. Twelve o'clock midnight that ushered in the 1st of August, 1838, to the British West India Islands—

Mr. WILSON, of Massachusetts. Do you not mean 1833?

Mr. HALE. No. The system of slavery was partially ended in 1833, but there was a system of apprenticeship from 1833 to 1838; and on the 1st of August, 1838, the whole system was wiped out; there was not a slave left in the islands. That was known; it was published in the islands long before the event occurred. In fact, the final blow to the system of slavery was given, not by the Imperial Parliament, but by the Colonial Legislature themselves, tired of the system of apprenticeships which the Parliament had inaugurated. When the midnight clock ushered in the 1st of August, 1838, the last manacle fell from the last slave in the British West India Islands. This population knew it, and what was the aspect they exhibited? Riots, drinking, acts of degradation and crime; such scenes as you might expect from

what the Senator from Kentucky said when he predicted that they would become pests to society? Was there anything of that kind exhibited? No, sir; but on the preceding night almost the whole population gathered themselves together in their churches, in their places of worship, and when the hour of twelve struck, which told them that the slaves had been converted into British freemen, they rose and sent up one united shout of thanksgiving to Almighty God for the great boon He had conferred upon them; and the conduct that these emancipated slaves have exhibited in most if not all the islands since, has been such as indicates not only the wisdom and the justice but the expediency of this measure. Yes, sir, it justifies the expediency of the measure; and the situation which the islands present at this time, by the most abundant and incontrovertible evidence, is such as to show a state of facts very much like what I have read of in these tables.

Now, sir, if raising sugar, and distilling molasses into rum were the chief end, the highest end for which human labor and human ingenuity can be employed, I concede that, in relation to some of these islands, the result would be disastrous to emancipation. They have made less rum and exported less rum than they did before; but they have established in place of irresponsible, ignorant barbarians, as the slaves were said to be, an industrious, happy, contented, and prosperous peasantry; and those immense estates even in the island of Jamaica which were abandoned by their proprietors because they were burdened with debt, have been divided up into small proprietaries of a few acres, where peace and comfort and comparative industry reign, and a new system of things in regard to exports has been inaugurated; and they are now constantly increasing.

Mr. President, there is nothing on earth that is more unjust, nothing more unkind—of course I do not attribute personal unkindness to the Senator; I speak of a class, and I speak of it as a philosophical truth—than for this boasted white Caucasian race to enslave the colored race, to keep them in a state of ignorance, to keep them in a state where it is a penal offense to teach them to read so much out of the Bible as that they may learn that God made them and Christ died to redeem them; I say it is cruel and unjust to such a people, denied the right of bringing a suit in court, denied the right of testifying as to their own personal rights and wrongs, the whole intelligence of the world shut out by the bar of an inexorable penal statute from enlightening their understandings; to pronounce them as degraded, ignorant, incapable of representation, because under the crushing weight of all these disabilities they have not made such progress as to enable them to step at once on an equality into a condition which their masters have enjoyed for many years. It is cruel. The injustice of it cannot be winked out of sight. It is as unjust as it would be to put out the eyes of a man and then taunt him with his blindness, as unjust as it would be to reproach any man with a personal deformity. It is as unjust as it is possible for perverted human intellect to be. Take off these burdens, give them a fair chance, let the light of science shine into their minds, make it no longer a crime punishable with imprisonment to open to them the pages of God's eternal truth, let them read something of the world that is about them, and something of the hope which leads

to the world beyond them, give them the elevating influence of some of the motives that have elevated you, and then if against all that they fail to rise and fail to improve, then, and not till then, will it be time to reproach them with their inability to cope and contend with their white masters.

Sir, I have a great many times felt for the colored people the injustice of such accusations and such reproaches as these. We have it now in our power to put this experiment to the test. We have it in our power to satisfy the Senator from Kentucky, and those who sympathize with him, whether his apprehensions are well or ill founded; but let me tell him that there are predictions of a very different character. Any man who will read the old prophets will see that if there be any one sin against which they invoked the judgments of God, for the repentance of which they promised the divine blessing, it was this very sin of slavery. Strike that out of the old prophets, and there will be nothing of them left. I know that generally we do not read the prophets with any such idea. Let me tell you an incident which shed a good deal of light on my mind in regard to the manner in which men read the beautiful and eloquent denunciations of the old prophets against oppression. I was once in a small village in my own State, where there was to be a meeting in the evening, and the gentleman who conducted it asked me if I would not talk to the people in the evening. He was a clergyman. I told him I would if he would read out of the Scriptures what I suggested to him. He said he would; so I gave him one of the chapters of Isaiah, in which this patriarchal institution is pretty roughly handled. The old gentlemen read it, with his spectacles on; and after a while he turned round and said: "Why, this seems to be against the national sin." Said I, "Exactly; that is what it was written for." "Well, I declare," said he, "I never thought of it before in that light." He never did. He had read the Bible for some seventy years, and the fact that the judgments of God were denounced against oppressions practiced in our nation never occurred to that poor old soul; and that is the way the Bible is read.

But now, sir, let me close by reading to the Senator from Kentucky predictions of the consequences that will follow emancipation exceedingly different from those which he has predicted. He predicts pauperism, degradation, crime, burdens upon society. That is the dark picture which fills his imagination as the consequences that are to follow the putting away of oppression from the midst of us. Let me read to him a different prediction:

"6. Is not this the fast that I have chosen?—to loose the bands of wickedness; to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?"

"7. Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? When thou seest the naked, that thou cover him; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?"

What are to be the consequences? Not pauperism, degradation, and crime, but—

"8. Then shall thy light break forth as the morning, and thine health shall spring forth speedily; and thy righteousness shall go before thee: the glory of the Lord shall be thy reward.

“9. Then shalt thou call, and the Lord shall answer; thou shalt cry, and he shall say, Here I am. If thou take away from the midst of thee the yoke, the putting forth of the finger, and speaking vanity.”

“10. And if thou draw out thy soal to the hungry, and satisfy the afflicted soul; then shall thy light rise in obscurity, and thy darkness be as the noon-day.

“11. And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones; and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not.

“12. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old waste places: thou shalt rise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.”—*Isaiah*, chapter 58.

Now, sir, this nation has an opportunity, if I may say so—and I say it reverently—of putting the Almighty to the test, and of seeing whether the consequences that his prophet has foretold or his Senator has predicted will follow as the result of this measure.

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